

Colleges Offering Majors in Homeland Security

by Dorie Turner, Associated Press

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Next year, Justan Holloway's class schedule will look like the plot of an action movie: The college student will study international terrorism, disaster planning, criminology, social psychology, and Arabic.

Holloway plans to be among the first to enroll in Savannah State University's new degree program in homeland security. The program is among a growing number of its kind as U.S. colleges try to meet rising demand for specialists trained in national defense and emergency management.

Graduates are finding themselves attractive to government agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, defense contractors, and other companies, where they do such things as create emergency management plans and design gas masks.

Some programs focus on terrorism and man-made threats. Others, such as Savannah State's, also train students to help with natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged the U.S. Gulf Coast last year.

"After the Katrina situation, I didn't like the way FEMA handled it," said Holloway, 19. "I was like, 'Maybe I can make a difference.'"

Trendsetters

More than 300 colleges offer some type of instruction in homeland security, a trend that began soon after the September 11 terrorist attacks, according to the National Academic Consortium for Homeland Security, which started three years ago with just a few institutions and is based at Ohio State University.

Todd Stewart, director of the consortium, said the college programs generally do not run background checks on applicants to weed out terrorists who might be looking for inside information on the nation's defenses. He said foreigners applying for student visas are already subject to screening, which has become more rigorous since September 11. Also, he said the college programs are not teaching sensitive information that isn't widely available elsewhere.

Critics say that awarding degrees in homeland security is pointless because the field is too broad and generic. It would be better to major in a specific aspect of national defense, such as Middle Eastern studies or cyber-security, said Steven Lab, head of the criminal justice department at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

"This is a money grab is what it is," Lab said. "The federal government decided to pour our money on this, and everybody wants to get a piece of the pie."

The Homeland Security Department spends about \$50 million a year on grants to colleges for research in national defense and for science and engineering scholarships.

"You can slice that and dice that lots of ways--first responders, science and engineering, intelligence analysis, critical infrastructure," said Laura Petonito, acting director of the department's university division.

An evolving program

"In the beginning of 2003, most would say homeland security has something to do with terrorism. If you say it at the beginning of 2007, it's terrorism, earthquakes, and who knows what else," Stewart said. "This is a long way from being an academic discipline."

Many schools created their programs by regrouping existing courses such as biosecurity, terrorism, and Arabic into one area of study. Colleges are also beefing up public administration programs and disaster-relief training to produce graduates ready to help cities and states plan for and respond to disasters.

Shirley Geiger, whose department of political science, public administration, and urban studies at Savannah State will house its homeland security program, said the historically black college will produce more minorities to work in disaster relief.

"We want to make sure those who respond to disasters look like the people who are needing assistance," Geiger said. "There are cultural differences in how people respond to emergencies."

Virginia Commonwealth University started its program in 2005, and had 100 students enrolled after its first year. So far, four students have graduated. Program coordinator William Newmann said two are employed in emergency management and one is starting work with the Border Patrol. The fourth is in graduate school.

The University of Massachusetts-Lowell offers a certificate in homeland security that is open to students pursuing various majors. The instructors are former intelligence personnel with the FBI, CIA, and military.

"If you look at the Web sites of these agencies, they're not looking for degrees in criminal justice or criminology," said Eve Buzawa, head of the college's criminal justice department. "They want engineers and technology people who have expertise in this area."